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ABSTRACT

This report identifies significant characteristics and implications of state programs that provide financial aid to students in private, independent non-profit colleges and universities and describes one program in detail, Virginia's Tuition Assistance Grant (TAG) Program. Following an introduction in Section 1, Section 2 reviews the scope of state aid to students across the nation, the case to be made for public support to private higher education, constitutional issues and how they have been addressed, tensions between politics and policy in policy development around these programs, intended and unintended effects of such programs, and a description of the TAG program and of the results of a survey of TAG Program administrators. The survey found that many eligible students were not receiving grants and that participating students and institutions regarded the program as very important. Section 3 spells out 11 specific conclusions including: (1) such assistance is an appropriate use of public funds; (2) these programs provide variety and strength in the overall higher education system; (3) increased coordination is required in higher education strategic planning; (4) programs like TAG increase tuition competition between private and public institutions; and (5) it is very difficult to gather data and measure the effectiveness of these programs. Appendix A contains the survey questionnaire. (Contains 24 references.) (JB)

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STATE AID TO STUDENTS
ATTENDING PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS
OF HIGHER EDUCATION:
THE ISSUES

By James A. Shultz

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State Aid to Students Attending Private Institutions of Higher Education: The Issues

I. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to identify the significant characteristics and implications of state programs to provide financial aid to students in private, independent non-profit colleges and universities.

This issue is a problem because not all agree that states should provide public funds for the support of private higher education. Due to the recession of the early 1990's, the states in the United States as a whole experienced the greatest decline in tax revenue since the Depression and were forced to cut support to state services, including higher education, by the greatest margin in U.S. history.

In spite of a slow economic recovery, state higher education policy makers are faced with planning for an expected enrollment surge in the late 1990's. On the one hand, states with fewer resources are re-evaluating their support of private higher education. At the same time, many states are considering what role private institutions might play in coping with expected enrollment increases (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia [SCHEV], 1992; Zumeta, 1992).

State assistance to private higher education has many forms. Various states have one or more programs for direct appropriations to support operating expenses, for state-backed loans for capital outlay, for tax breaks benefiting private institutions, for contracting specific educational services, for student financial aid programs, and others (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 1990). Financial aid from state funds for students attending private institutions is packaged in many ways, including need based and non-need based, merit and non-merit scholarships, grants and loans. The range of issues related to state support and to student aid are much too broad for coverage in one report. Therefore, primary reference in this

review will be to non-need and non-merit based state grants to students attending private institutions.

The report was prepared by:

- reviewing recent statistics on the scope of state aid to students attending private institutions;
- identifying and analyzing historical and other contextual factors facing state policy makers in this area;
- exploring, in particular, the initiation, development and current status of Virginia's Tuition Assistance Grant (TAG) program; and
- surveying financial aid officers in Virginia private colleges and universities whose students are eligible for the TAG program.

II. Background

Scope of State Aid to Students. Approximately 29 states presently have non-need based financial aid programs, but for most of these programs students in both public and private institutions are eligible. In a 1991-92 survey, only 6 states, including Virginia, reported having tuition grant programs exclusively for students attending private institutions.

Across the country states are presently spending about \$2 billion per year in state funds on aid for public and private college and university students. The 6 states with grant programs for private college students are presently spending about \$96 million a year on these, and in 1992-93 Virginia made available about \$18.6 million for its program. For 1992-93, at up to \$1,440 per student, Virginia presently probably has the most generous program in the country on a per student basis.

For all states as a whole, state financial aid grant funds to undergraduates cover a larger percentage of the total costs for a student attending a private institution than for a student at a public one, and in the late 1980's the percentage of students receiving state aid at private institutions was about 35% compared to 25% at public institutions.

At the same time, the national recession and resulting declines in state revenues had a noticeable impact on state grant financial aid. In a national survey, half the states reported that they were going to reduce or level fund grant awards for 1991-92 versus 1990-91. Grants to students attending private institutions were expected to be down nationwide by 2.6%. Virginia was one of only two states reporting a planned increase in grant awards (American Council on Education [ACE], 1989; National Association of State Scholarship & Grant Programs [NASSGP], 1992; Southern Regional Education Board, 1992).

The Case for Public Support for Private Higher Education. The idea of having states support privately controlled higher education institutions has proponents in both the private and public sectors. The most common reasons are listed below (ECS, 1990; Gregory, 1984; Millard, 1974; Whalen, 1992):

- ▢ Private institutions offer a greater variety of institutional styles and programs.
- ▢ Private institutions promote diversity - in total, private institutions enroll about the same proportion of minorities as public institutions.
- ▢ Private institutions serve students with a wide variety of income levels.
- ▢ On the average, private institutions are smaller, which is seen as an advantage by many.
- ▢ Over half of all first professional degrees and about one third of all graduate degrees are earned at private institutions, and one third of the major research universities are private.
- ▢ Private colleges and universities may have more freedom than their public counterparts to take risks and innovate.
- ▢ The independent model provided by private institutions has set the standard for lay board governance in all higher education, and the existence of a strong private sector fosters competition that strengthens the total higher education system.
- ▢ Few will argue that higher education does not serve an important "public" purpose, regardless of whether it is provided at a public or private institution; if the public benefits, then the public should assist in its support.

Many of these are "traditional" or "classic" reasons put forth for state support, and they have an enduring significance. The increased use of state-funded financial aid, beginning in the late 1960's and early 1970's, brought some of these principles to prominence but they are now supplemented by today's social and political concerns for diversity, access, and equality of choice in higher education. These goals may now emphasize more than ever a need for substantial state financial aid programs for students in private institutions (Tierney, 1980; Zumeta, 1992). In spite of the Carnegie Council's recommendation for a strong federal role in establishing a national, non-need based program of tuition grants for all students attending private colleges and universities, the states continue to provide about half of all grant aid to these students (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1980; ACE, 1989).

The Constitutional Issue. The emergence of student financial aid as the primary means of public support for private higher education brought focus to lingering constitutional and legal issues. Although public support existed from colonial times, it was indirect for the most part and its size and impact were relatively small. Beginning in the 1960's, as public enrollments soared and tuition remained relatively low at state institutions, political pressure mounted on state legislatures to do something about the weakening competitive position and declining economic viability of many private institutions.

Programs for state support of tuition grants met with legal challenges almost immediately from interests concerned about the separation of church and state. Most prominent were the state and federal cases brought on the basis of state constitutional provisions and the religious freedom and separation clauses of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In the early 1970's the U.S. Supreme Court decided two cases that were relatively unrestrictive of state actions - *Tilton v. Richardson* (1971) and *Hunt v. McNair* (1973). Many state constitutions, however, had much more restrictive language regarding state support of religious institutions. Several states, including Virginia, had to amend their state constitutions to provide for state financial aid programs benefiting students at private institutions. Many states today do not have programs solely for students at private institutions because of their

continuing state constitutional provisions (Craddick, 1987; Gregory, 1984; McFarlane, 1973). Virginia's Tuition Assistance Grant Program specifically prohibits awards to students attending institutions providing "religious training or theological education" (SCHEV, 1984, 1993).

Politics or Policy? While public political pressure was often behind the early legal challenges, a concerted political effort by independent institutional interests was usually the key ingredient in those states that successfully established tuition grant programs, either just for private institutions or for students at both private and public institutions. Several researchers report that the most successful and sustained programs are in those states with well organized private higher education lobbies. The beginnings of Virginia's tuition assistance program clearly owes a lot to the organized effort of Virginia's private institutions. Also, a recent survey of private state higher education associations found that student financial aid policy and funding is the number one issue of interest to these groups (Gregory, 1984; McFarlane, 1973; University of Virginia School of Education [UVASE], 1977; Zumeta, 1992).

A sizable body of scholarly literature has developed around a more formalized treatment of the policy choices and issues involving state assistance to private institutions. It draws heavily from economic theory and offers a continuum of choice for policy makers: a completely wide open, laissez-faire approach; a conscious effort to balance private and public higher education positions; emphasis on individual choice with considerable reliance on financial aid to the student; or protection of the position and interests of private institutions without regard to impact on the public sector.

Analysis and review has also resulted in various models of how to position financial aid efforts. Using the criteria of equitable treatment for public and private institutions, one approach says that flat, per student grants are no more than institutional subsidies and ought to be avoided (note that this goes against the Carnegie Council recommendation). Of the two "ability to pay" approaches (income based and need based), this model urges the use of need as a criteria, suggesting that it tends to treat the private institutions more equitably because

even though average income of students attending is higher, costs to attend are also higher (Berdahl, 1978; Blaydon, 1978).

Because of the states' critical role in setting public higher education policy and their control of at least as much financial support to private higher education if not more than the federal government (tax breaks, student financial aid), the states are now seen by most observers as the critical policy forum for private institutions (ECS, 1990).

Intended and Unintended Effects. Probably the most influential original reason for increasing state aid to students in private institutions, and for other forms of state aid to independent institutions, was to support their financial viability. It is fair to say that states with strong traditions of private higher education continue to have viable independent institutions. So, it is reasonable to conclude that the effort to supplement the financial activity of many private institutions has succeeded so far.

However, in the twenty-five years or so since substantial increases in state aid to private institutions began, other social, political, and economic considerations have gained attention. Once established, state aid programs to students and directly to institutions were re-oriented to achieve other purposes (Fife, 1976; Moore, 1978):

- Many states now have student grant programs benefiting students at either public or private colleges. In this context, alternative aid policies are analyzed for their actual and potential effects on "freedom of choice," the college-going rates of lower income students, and demand for public versus private programs.
- Tuition grant programs are often specifically targeted to increase attendance of minorities.
- One study found that these programs may even affect the college-going rate of women.

Conclusive evidence does not exist to support the notion that tuition grant programs, like Virginia's, which are intended solely or primarily for students attending private institutions, actually make a major difference in a student's choice to attend or remain at a private institution. Reviews of several studies of this issue found that only about half the studies could

conclude there was any significant effect on choice to attend a private institution (Fife, 1976; Sidar, 1978). In a survey of Virginia students receiving grant awards about four years after the program began, about 60% of the respondents said they would have enrolled at the same private institution they were attending even if they had not received the award (UVASE, 1977).

In a broader scope, the introduction of significant levels of state support to private institutions has had substantial effects on statewide educational policy. Program assessment and evaluation is often difficult and complex, but increasing pressure is being brought to bear to determine what the effects really are. In many states, state support has resulted in increased competition between private and public institutions, since state aid often either results in lower private tuition or an increase in the student's ability to afford the cost of attending a private institution. Increased aid has also reinforced the need for more statewide coordination and planning involving a state's private institutions. In many states this has sharpened the debate over how much control a state should have over its private institutions (Schwartz, 1978; Tierney, 1980; Whalen, 1992; Zumeta, 1992).

Virginia's Tuition Assistance Grant (TAG) Program. Virginia's TAG program remains one of the very few in the U.S. that provides non-need, non-merit based tuition grants (sometimes called tuition equalization grants) to state residents attending a qualifying state private institution full-time. Presently 25 Virginia institutions qualify and all are members of The Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia. To receive a grant, a student only has to submit an application to the institution by the deadline. For 1992-93 the maximum possible grant per student is \$1,500, but actual awards are expected to be about \$1,440 because program regulations limit individual awards to total available state appropriations divided by the number of eligible students applying (Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia, 1991). Graduate and first professional students are also eligible (SCHEV, 1993).

Virginia's program began later than many others, but had a similar history in that constitutional challenges were raised immediately upon passage of the enacting law. The 1972 session of the legislature passed two related bills to provide financial aid to residents

attending private colleges. Within a year the State Supreme Court was asked to review its constitutional allowability under both the Virginia and federal constitutions. The case was brought by mutual agreement, although the state attorney general was on one side of the case and the state comptroller on the other. Following legislative amendments in 1973, another constitutional case, and a state voter referendum to amend the state constitution in 1974, the first TAG grants were issued in the 1976-77 academic year for a maximum individual award of \$400 (McFarlane, 1973; UVASE, 1977).

Virginia's private colleges are well organized and usually speak with one voice on important public issues. This is probably the primary reason the TAG program was approved originally and accounts for why Virginia, compared to most other states, continues to distribute a very high proportion of its state aid on a non-need basis. Virginia ranks about 11th in the country in total full-time undergraduate enrollment and about 25th in total amount of all public and private undergraduate aid per full-time student. However, in 1991-92 about 72% of Virginia's financial aid was awarded on a non-need basis, whereas for the country as a whole the amount was about 9% (NASSGP, 1992).

As noted earlier, there is not strong evidence that grant awards are decisive in determining a student's choice of whether or not to attend a private institution. Studies of Virginia TAG grant recipients found similar results, although the program was supposedly founded to "encourage freedom of choice" and "preserve the pluralistic vitality" of the total Virginia higher education system (Schwartz, 1978; UVASE, 1977).

It may also be worthwhile, however, to get some recent views about the value of the program and its impact on participating students and institutions. For this issue report, the financial aid officers of all 25 members of The Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia were mailed a survey questionnaire in the month of March. Their names and titles were identified from The HEP 1993 Higher Education Directory (Higher Education Publishers, Inc.).

The questionnaire is included as Appendix A. The validity of the survey results is limited, among other things, by the fact that this is self-reporting; that there is not a 100% return; that

the resulting sample is not random; and that we may reasonably expect some bias on the part of financial aid officers about financial aid programs.

Thirteen institutions, or 52%, returned the questionnaire. This group reported having a total of 5,773 students presently receiving TAG grants, with the smallest number at any institution being 108 and the largest 920. These institutions also reported having 462 eligible enrolled students presently not receiving the grants. This ranged from a low of - 0 - to a high of 200 at each of two institutions, which represented 26% of total reported eligible at one institution and 33% at the other. In total, about 7.41% of the reported eligible students were reported as not receiving grants.

Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of TAG grants to their students (question #3) and to their institution (question #4). If the rating scales are converted to numerical scores, with "extremely important" rated a "5" and "totally unimportant" rated a "1," average scores for all responses may be calculated.

On the average, response ratings on both dimensions were high. Student importance received an average rating of 4.31 while institutional importance averaged 4.23 - both between very important and extremely important.

In question #5 respondents were asked to provide reasons for why they believe it is important for the state to provide aid to students in private higher education. By asking this question I was attempting to determine whether there is any consensus or common view among Virginia institutions and whether the justification for these programs as found in the literature agrees with what people actually administering these programs might think. The most frequent responses may be summarized as follows. Respondents felt the TAG program is justified because it:

- Reduces the relative cost of attending a private versus a public institution.
- Balances enrollment - encourages more students to attend private institutions.
- Saves the state money because the cost per TAG grant is less than the average per student cost of operating a public institution.

- ❑ Encourages diversity of institutions, which provides a wider variety of student choice.
- ❑ Returns some of the tax revenue paid by Virginia residents to students as benefits.
- ❑ Helps maintain the generally high quality and smaller size of Virginia private institutions.
- ❑ Reinforces the idea that higher education is a public goal supported by private as well as public institutions.

In spite of the survey's methodological limitations, some observations may be made about the results. It should be of some concern that so many eligible students are not receiving the grants. This could be for many reasons. The students may not have applied in time or the institution may not be diligent in making sure each student receives the information in time. Two institutions in particular have high rates of non-participation. It might be useful to know in particular why only two experience this and the others do not. Seven of the 13 respondents reported having no eligible students without grants. One implication of higher participation, however, is that the more students there are participating state wide, the lower the amount of the grant to each student.

The high importance ratings for the program on both the student and institutional dimensions is about as expected. While there is some administrative burden, it could be anticipated that institutions would support a program that provides students a considerable incentive to attend with no cash outlay to the institution. That administrators rate importance to students so high (question #3), however, is somewhat contradictory to survey findings reported in the literature. Studies of factors affecting institutional choice have generally found that while students and their families approve of these grant programs, their existence usually is not a primary determining factor in whether the student attends a particular private institution or any private institution.

III. Conclusions

1. As general public policy, state assistance to private higher education is an appropriate use of public funds because private institutions assist public colleges and universities to achieve a vital public purpose - increased education for the general population.
2. Use of public funds to support private institutions or students attending these institutions is also appropriate because private institutions provide for a variety and strength in the overall higher education system that would not be there without them.
3. The use of public funds in support of private institutions or its students requires increased coordination in higher education strategic planning and in specific program planning involving both public and private institutions. Whenever public funds are used, some assurance must be provided for accountability and for ensuring that funds are being applied in the most effective and efficient ways possible. This means that private institutions may be required to submit to more coordination and direction from state higher education coordinating bodies. Another implication is the possibility that states will end up having more control over private institutions than is appropriate or more than private institutions are comfortable with.
4. States that have student financial aid programs either solely or partially benefiting students attending private institutions should adopt more clear-cut, structured policy analysis and choice models that make potential effects on their public institutions a more visible factor in the decision making process. One model for program design suggests four components: 1) attempt to predict both private and public institutional responses; 2) identify potential unintended or even undesirable impacts and outcomes; 3) assess to what extent proposed policies affect institutional autonomy; and 4) identify potential constitutional and legal barriers and problems (Blaydon, 1978).
5. Use of public funds for support of private institutions or its students usually increases tuition competition between private and public institutions. Tuition grants and other state subsidies may have the effect of bringing public and private tuition rates closer. However,

tuition grants to privates may also encourage or require public institutions to raise tuition. If private rates aren't rising as fast as public rates or if state budget cuts result partially from appropriation increases for private tuition support, public institutions may have little choice but to increase tuition rates.

6. It is extremely **difficult to gather appropriate data and measure the effectiveness** of state programs of tuition assistance and other forms of aid to private higher education institutions due to the complex context within which they are administered. Based on the studies reviewed for this report, it appears that such studies are extremely complex, time consuming and expensive. Due to the nature of aid programs, gathering clear, useful data is very problematic. This leads to studies having preliminary, tentative conclusions and to the fact that programs may be continued by default because of the difficulty of obtaining a clear understanding of how or to what degree they are effective.
7. In spite of the research difficulties and challenges, **additional, more current research is needed** to assess program effectiveness and the degree to which intended and unintended consequences are achieved. In preparing this report it was observed that there appear to be relatively few recent quantitative and policy studies directly related to this topic, as compared to the late 1970's and early 1980's. Also, to study this issue, consideration should be given to expanding and exploring other research, study and modeling techniques and to borrowing methods from other fields, such as economics, mathematical modeling, and decision/choice modeling.
8. **Virginia's Tuition Assistance Grant program (TAG) may be challenged on the grounds that it is not need based.** If access, promotion of student diversity, and support for more freedom of choice in practical terms are higher education objectives, then the more that financial aid programs are need based, the more funds tend to be channeled to those with less ability to pay and the more these objectives will be met. Virginia's TAG program has many positive aspects. The state has maintained a significant commitment to

it for twenty years. Virginia was one of the few states that chose to maintain or increase state student aid funds during the recent period of state budget cuts in higher education.

Even if Virginia's TAG program were made more need based, it would not necessarily reduce the amount of funds flowing to the private institutions. The program could probably still legally be geared only to private institutions, but students receiving the aid would have to demonstrate need.

9. The results of the survey of Virginia's private institutions for this report show that **a fair percentage of eligible students may not be receiving the benefits of the TAG program**. In two institutions large percentages of the eligible students were not participating and some students were not in several of the others. More exploration of the reasons for this is in order. If students were not informed by the institutions about the program at all or not informed of deadlines early enough to meet them, then the institutions should be encouraged to improve their administrative procedures.

10. Further **reviews and studies of state aid to private institutions could look at other specific approaches**, whether a state should be engaged in such activity, and effectiveness. Examples include:

- direct state subsidies/appropriations to private colleges and universities
- state contracts with private institutions for specific program services or contracts for accepting a specific number of students
- tuition grants to all students at private institutions, not just state residents
- tuition grants to state residents to attend private or public colleges and universities outside the state

11. Virginia's **TAG program may be an effective component in an overall strategy to cope with Virginia's expected enrollment increase in the late 1990's**. An administrative mechanism and familiarity with the program are already in place. The TAG concept has previously been tested and accepted constitutionally and politically. In fact, as cuts in state support to operating budgets were being made in the early 1990's, TAG and other state

tuition aid programs in Virginia received approval for increases. It appears more dollars could be added to the program to serve more Virginia students at independent institutions without much additional administrative burden.

However, it would also seem appropriate for the state to work closely with the association of independent institutions to consider modifications to the TAG program to make it partially or fully need based. This could allow the state to continue to meet its goal of providing a reasonable level of support to institutional diversity within the state while improving overall student access, choice, and diversity within the state's higher education system as a whole.

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SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE
Virginia Tuition Assistance Grant (TAG) Program

1. Approximate number of students in the current Spring, 1993, semester at your institution receiving Virginia Tuition Assistance (TAG) Grants: _____

2. Approximate number of eligible students in the current Spring, 1993, semester at your institution not receiving Virginia Tuition Assistance (TAG) Grants: _____

3. Please rate how important the Virginia Tuition Assistance (TAG) Grant is, in your opinion, to the overall financial support of the "typical/average," "Virginia resident" student attending your institution (check one):

- _____ a. Extremely important
_____ b. Very important
_____ c. Important
_____ d. Little importance
_____ e. Totally unimportant

Comments: _____

4. Please rate the importance, in your judgment, of the Virginia Tuition Assistance (TAG) Grant Program to the overall ability of your institution to recruit and retain Virginia residents (check one):

- _____ a. Extremely important
_____ b. Very important
_____ c. Important
_____ d. Little importance
_____ e. Totally unimportant

Comments: _____

5. What are the most significant reasons, in your opinion, that justify the State's role in providing non need-based tuition grants to Virginia residents attending independent institutions in Virginia (please list)?

- a) _____
b) _____
c) _____

6. Other comments:

Thank you for your cooperation and assistance. All responses will be aggregated; individual institutional responses will remain anonymous.